

A Captured American Presented by Nicaragua

Reagan Administration Denies U.S. Link to Plane

10-8-86 A1

By Joanne Omang
Washington Post Staff Writer

Top Reagan administration officials yesterday flatly denied any U.S. government connection with a transport plane that the Sandinista government said it shot down in Nicaragua with three Americans and a man of Latin origin aboard.

At the same time, U.S. officials indicated that they knew more about the situation than they were willing to disclose, including the names of those killed in the crash. Secretary of State George P. Shultz said the aircraft was "hired by private people" who "had no connection with the U.S. government at all." He said they were "not from our military, not from any U.S. government agency, CIA included These are private citizens."

A spokesman for the Central Intelligence Agency denied the agency was involved in the mission, as the Nicaraguan government asserted, but refused to deny that it knew anything about it.

The issue of CIA involvement was heightened by Wisconsin relatives of Eugene Hasenfus, the lone survivor of the crash. Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, told reporters that Hasenfus' wife, Sally, had telephoned the State Department yesterday morning from her home in Marinette, Wis., "and said her husband worked for the CIA."

A spokesman for Sally Hasenfus said she "is not granting any interviews to anyone." Earlier Hasenfus was quoted by wire services as saying of her husband, "I don't know where he is and what he's doing. I only know what I see on the TV, too, and I really don't know anymore."

The Associated Press said that Hasenfus' brother, William, reportedly told a friend that Hasenfus had gone to work 20 years ago for Air America in Vietnam, when it was a CIA cover company, and later returned to work for the firm readying cargo for air drops.

Kathy Pherson, a CIA spokesman, denied any link. "We have nothing to do with the plane, nothing to do with the guy. He does not work for us, and we are not involved," she said. The CIA is barred by law from aiding the Nicaraguan contras, or counterrev-

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Crash Survivor Described As Adviser in El Salvador

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By Julia Preston
Washington Post Foreign Service

MANAGUA, Nicaragua, Oct. 7—An American captured by Nicaraguan troops appeared briefly at a press conference here late today, and the Sandinista military displayed credentials identifying him and the American pilot who died in a downed plane Sunday, as U.S. military advisers in El Salvador.

A second American, the copilot, also was killed, according to Nicaraguan officials.

The Nicaraguan government charged that the flight was operated by the CIA to resupply U.S.-backed rebels, known as contras, inside Nicaragua.

U.S. embassies in Central America denied the aircraft and its crew were linked to the U.S. government.

"My name is Eugene Hasenfus. I'm from Marinette, Wisconsin," said the tall red-headed man who was led out in front of a roomful of journalists by a Sandinista officer.

"I was captured yesterday in southern Nicaragua," Hasenfus said, in a statement lasting less than a minute. He was quickly steered away by Sandinista guards.

Hasenfus is the first American prisoner of war the leftist Sandinista government is known to have captured in five years of fighting against the contras.

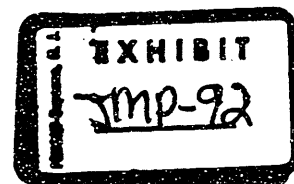
Hasenfus, 35, was dressed in a mud-caked blue cotton work shirt, blue jeans and work boots. His face appeared bruised and swollen, but he stood and walked without aid. Deep sadness marked his features.

Lt. Col. Roberto Calderon, Sandinista Army commander in the southeastern jungle region where he said the C123 military cargo aircraft was shot down Sunday afternoon, identified the deceased pilot as Capt. William J. Cooper.

The copilot was identified as Wallace-Blaine Sawger, also killed in the crash. A fourth crew member was of Latin origin but could not be identified, Calderon said. The bodies, found inside the plane's smoking hull, have not yet been evacuated from the region, he said.

According to the Sandinista officer, Hasenfus said under questioning that he was a "kicker," the crew member assigned to push cargo out the plane's open rear door into

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Nicaragua Presents American Crewman After Crash

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the forests below. Hasenfus was said to have parachuted to safety when the plane was pierced by a portable Soviet-Bloc rocket fired by Sandinista infantrymen.

Hasenfus was surrounded and captured at midday yesterday by Nicaraguan counterinsurgency forces as he fled through overgrowth about 30 miles north of the border with Costa Rica.

In the plane's charred and fractured wreckage, Nicaraguan troops found wallets they said belonged to the three Americans. One plastic-encased credential in Hasenfus' name bore his picture and indicated issue by the Salvadoran Air Force on July 20 of this year. It identified him as an "adviser" in the "USA" group at the Ilopango air base in San Salvador.

A similar reddish credential, its photo showing a man with a mustache, was in Sawyer's name.

A third credential was issued to Cooper by a Miami-based air freight firm, Southern Air Transport. It was dated April 2, 1986, with a signature identified as that of personnel director Carl Holvea.

One wallet contained the business card of Capt. Humberto Villalta, an officer of the Salvadoran Navy. Another card belonged to P.J. Buechler of the State Department office that administered humanitarian aid for the contras during the past fiscal year.

In El Salvador, the U.S. Embassy said in a statement that Hasenfus "is not part of the U.S. military group here. He has no links with the U.S. Embassy. We don't know who he is."

The U.S. Embassy in Managua sent a diplomatic note to the Foreign Ministry requesting consular access to Hasenfus and additional information about the dead, according to **Alberto Fernandez, the embassy spokesman, who said the embassy received no response. Fernandez said, "Whether the airplane and its crew and cargo were financed by the U.S. government."**

Sandinista troops removed from the wreckage about 70 new Soviet-made assault rifles, 100,000 rounds of rifle ammunition, about one dozen PG7 rockets and 150 pairs of combat boots, said Calderon, the Sandinista commander. Calderon said Nicaraguan intelligence had detected four other contra resupply flights from El Salvador since July. He asserted that the flights circle in from the Pacific Ocean over Costa Rica before looping north into Nicaragua.

[Earlier, Hasenfus told local journalists in San Carlos, near the crash site, that the flight began in Miami, picked him up in El Salvador, then went to Honduras, where it picked up a Nicaraguan, and entered Nicaraguan airspace from Costa Rica at a site called La Noca, The Associated Press reported.]

Calderon quoted Hasenfus as saying in a "conversation" with his captors that five contra re-

supply planes are parked at the Salvadoran Ilopango base. The downed plane was said to carry registry number C824, according to a log book Calderon held in his hands.

None of the three Americans appeared to be active-duty U.S. military personnel. Hasenfus reportedly said he served in the U.S. military in Vietnam until 1972 and had "continued to do the same work he did in Vietnam."

In Tegucigalpa, a contra spokesman said by telephone that all of his group's aircraft were accounted for undamaged "in their airports."

Carlos Icaza of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), which with an estimated 14,000 men, is the largest contra force, said the group sometimes accepts aid, including air resupply of its field fighters, from "private volunteers."

But the contra leader said that in recent weeks no organization made any attempt to coordinate such assistance with the FDN.

Icaza said the CIA has not been involved in resupplying contra rebels with flights over Nicaragua since its mandate to provide aid was suspended in 1984. He said no U.S.-supported contra group currently has enough funds to obtain an airplane such as the C123.

The C123 is a twin-engine cargo craft that has been in production, with various models, since Fairchild introduced it in the 1950s. It has been a staple troop carrier for the U.S. Air Force and was in heavy use in Vietnam.

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oluntaries, with anything but intelligence information, "and we do not break those restrictions," she said.

Asked whether that meant the agency knew nothing about the incident, Pierson said, "I can't help you."

Asked to identify the four men, State Department officials said they had the names but would not reveal them. They would not say how they had obtained the names.

Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, told reporters that if reports that the four were carrying arms to anti-Nicaraguan rebels were true, "then they are heroes."

Ernesto Palazio, spokesman here for the United Nicaraguan Opposition, the rebels' umbrella organization, said the downed plane "could very well be" one of the contras' planes, but that he was not yet certain. "Ever since Congress placed restrictions on aid, we have had to go get private donations," he said. "Occasionally we have had to use the services of volunteers to complement our own pilots."

He said there had been no contact yet with contras on the ground near the crash site in southern Nicaragua.

Spokesmen for several groups previously associated with aid shipments to the contras denied any link to or knowledge of this flight. They included officials of the Civilian Materiel Assistance, formerly Civilian-Military Assistance, in Memphis, which supplies medical and other aid and which lost two members in a September 1984 helicopter crash in Nicaragua.

Retired major general John K. Singlaub, head of the U.S. Council for World Freedom in Phoenix, who has spoken proudly of facilitating arms purchases for the contras, said from the Far East through spokeswoman Joyce Downey that he knew nothing about the plane. "We have loved all of our people," Downey said.

Officials of Southern Air Transport in Miami, whose planes have reportedly been chartered for previous aid flights to Nicaragua, said they knew nothing about this one or Hasenfus. William Hasenfus said his brother, Eugene, had been working for a Florida air freight company, but refused to name it.

Defense Department records show that a Eugene Hasenfus joined the U.S. Marines on May 9, 1960, was trained as a parachute rigger for equipment drops and sent to Camp Pendleton, Calif., where he remained until he left the service as a corporal June 17, 1965.

His military records say he did not serve abroad. His stepmother, Theresa Hasenfus, told The Associated Press, however, that he had served in Vietnam.

Durenberger said at a news conference that the CIA had assured the intelligence committee that "there is absolutely no connection

between that plane, that was in that airplane, the pilot or anybody else [on board] and a U.S. government-financed or -sponsored effort such as the so-called contra operation."

Durenberger added that he believes the agency: "They have so much riding on this . . . I don't think they've ever lied to any of us. The problem is what they don't tell you."

Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), the committee vice chairman, said he was concerned that the flight might have been "connected with any of these soldier of fortune type operations which are sort of sent out there with a wink and a shrug as a way of going around our stated foreign policy." If there is such a link, he said, "then I think we're in for some very serious trouble."

Committee spokesman David Holliday said later that, based on current information, "nobody on the committee believes that the CIA or any government agency violated the law or did something they shouldn't have done."

Rep. Michael D. Barnes (D-Md.), head of the Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Western Hemisphere affairs, said he thought it "unlikely" that the government was not involved. "Very little of what's happening down there right now is not somehow affected by U.S. action," he said.

Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Tex.), meanwhile, called for a House investigation into two recent air crashes in Texas and Nicaragua to determine whether they were part of an alleged covert CIA operation aimed at toppling the Sandinista government.

Rep. Henry J. Hyde (R-Ill.), a member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, said he agreed with Assistant Secretary of State Abrams. "The Soviets are pouring all kinds of stuff in there. And unless there's some kind of an effort at equalization, the contras will be overwhelmed," he said. "Anyone who's attempting to keep them viable, I say, 'God bless 'em.'"

~~He said he thought the plane was a C-47, a bi-engine propeller plane of the sort that had kept the resistance alive since Congress cut off U.S. aid to it in May 1983. "Some very brave people . . . have been willing to actually bring this material into Nicaragua, which means to be the spearhead of this fight," Abrams said. "That's what they're doing. . . . If these people were involved in this effort, then they are heroes."~~

He said he had "some intelligence about the plane" and the people on it but that the information "is not for public consumption."

Asked about possible violations of the Neutrality Act, which bars U.S. citizens from supporting attacks on nations with which the United States is not at war, Abrams said he had advice for others seeking to aid the Nicaraguan rebels: "If you're planning to do something like this, get yourself a lawyer."